

Arms and the Hobbit:

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and the Classical Epic

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From its first publication in 1954–5 to Peter Jackson's recent, highly-acclaimed film adaptation, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* has often been hailed as an 'epic' novel. The epithet is obviously applicable in a broad sense: the scale and scope of the narrative, as well as its subject-matter (the heroic quest, pitched battles between sword-wielding warriors, the archetypal struggle between good and evil), chime perfectly with the popular modern conception of the literary or cinematic epic.

The main influences on Tolkien's plotting and characterization, and even to some extent the thematic emphases of his work, were the literature and mythology of the Scandinavian countries and of Anglo-Saxon England. But Tolkien himself was classically trained – he began his undergraduate career in Oxford as a Classicist, before switching to English – and would certainly have acquired a thorough familiarity with the Homeric poems and with Virgil's *Aeneid*, so that comparison with classical epic too can point up what is most interesting about the values of Tolkien's work. These varied epic traditions gave him a rich backdrop against which to write – what Tolkien himself called the 'soup of story'.

Parallel players

Superficial similarities are not far to seek. Several of Tolkien's characters have more or less close analogues in Homer and/or Virgil. The 'shieldmaiden' Éowyn, for instance, finds a counterpart in the Amazon queen Penthesilea, who appears briefly as a sculpted figure on Dido's temple in *Aeneid* 1, and also played a larger part in the Epic Cycle (a sequence of Greek epic poems filling in the parts of the Trojan War story not directly narrated by Homer). Virgil's epic also has its female warrior, Camilla, who has a brief starring role in book 11 of the *Aeneid*. It is perhaps not entirely coincidental that Tolkien's character, like her predecessors, is a figure with whom her creator seems not entirely comfortable: heroic, yes, but also unhappy and unfulfilled. Though she just avoids getting killed off (unlike either Camilla or Penthesilea), she only finds happiness at the end of the novel by shrinking back into a much more conventionally domestic role as the wife of Faramir. Even in the Britain of the 1950s, it seems, powerful independent women could appear just as problematic and even threatening as in Augustan Rome or Archaic Greece. Or take Shelob, the devouring female monster, who plays a part similar to the Sirens or Scylla and Charybdis, attempting to swallow the hero up before he can complete his quest.

Identifying Aragorn...

Aragorn and Frodo both, in their different ways, resemble the protagonists of the Homeric and Virgilian epics. Aragorn, like the heroes of the *Iliad*, is noted for his warrior prowess; but he also resembles both Aeneas and still more Odysseus as a king who returns *in disguise* to reclaim his rightful place. Odysseus is magically transformed by Athene to make him look like an old beggar before he confronts the suitors who have been squatting in his palace for the past twenty-odd years; Aragorn's transformation is managed in a more naturalistic way, though the fact that his battered outward appearance conceals an underlying nobility is constantly emphasized. As Bilbo puts it at the Council of Elrond in Rivendell, 'all that is gold does not glitter'; and we learn later that Aragorn fought for Minas Tirith in his youth under an assumed name. When he finally enters the city after the climactic battle in the third part of the novel, he declines to do so in full regal state, but rather resumes the guise of Ranger under which his identity has lain more or less concealed up till this point.

... as Aeneas, the founding hero

The hero's return in disguise is a familiar folk-tale motif, which Tolkien need not have adopted directly from the *Odyssey*; perhaps rather more striking are resemblances between Aragorn and Virgil's hero Aeneas. Aeneas is himself characterised by Virgil as a kind of 'anti-Odysseus': his perilous journey in the first part of the *Aeneid* does not take him back home, as Odysseus' does, but to the strange and alien land of Italy, where he must secure the future of his race by founding a new city, a kind of 'bigger and better' Troy. In another sense, though, this is a homecoming of sorts, since Aeneas' distant ancestors, the founders of Troy, came originally from the land of Italy to which their descendant now returns. Something rather similar is true of Aragorn: his journey too is both a journey away and a return – The Return of the King. Like Aeneas, he is a kind of city founder, though his coronation at the end of Tolkien's novel is even more clearly a restoration or *re-foundation* than the founding of Lavinium (or Rome-to-be) by his Virgilian counterpart. Rome is Troy reborn; Aragorn's Minas Tirith is Minas Anor reborn, a pattern very clearly symbolised by the rediscovery towards the end of the novel of a seedling of the White Tree of Gondor, emblem of kingship (the dead predecessor of which offers such a striking visual image in the film version).

... as Aeneas, the dutiful hero

Like Aeneas, too, Aragorn has to make a choice between public and private, or between love and duty: just as Aeneas must leave first his wife Creusa and then his lover Dido, so Aragorn must be parted (at least temporarily) from his beloved Arwen. Tolkien seems to point us towards this parallel in a scene of parting which verbally recalls one of the most famous episodes of the *Aeneid*, the exchange between Aeneas and Dido in Book 4. Aeneas has been accused by his lover in a scene of passionate recrimination of trying to sneak off to Italy without even telling her; he responds: 'if the Fates allowed me to lead my life as I would and to settle my affairs in my own way, I would be caring before all for the city of Troy, and the cherished remnants of my people'; at the end of the speech, he adds the memorable half-line 'it is not of my own free will that I make for Italy'.

Aragorn echoes these words in conversation not with Arwen but with the Rohirric princess Éowyn, who loves him in vain: 'I do not choose paths of peril, Éowyn. Were I to go where my heart dwells, far in the North I would now be wandering in the fair valley of Rivendell.' Though both heroes feel that no real choice is offered them, and each must leave the woman he loves for the sake of duty, there is a striking difference between the two scenes: Aeneas' first choice would be neither Italy nor Dido but to have stayed in Troy; Aragorn's decision on the other hand

is the more romantic, more straightforwardly heroic resolution to risk his life in the hope that victory will ultimately be followed by reunion with Arwen – as indeed transpires in the closing chapters. This shift in emphasis reflects in part the influence of medieval romance on Tolkien's representation of the relationship between his two characters, and more generally the higher value set on romantic love in the modern world than the ancient world: what for Aeneas is a temptation that must be resisted is for Tolkien something to be temporarily renounced, yet ultimately conferred as a reward on the virtuous hero.

Frodo and Gollum: a heroic encounter?

The exploits of Frodo, the reluctant hero (in some ways) like Aeneas, also allow us to see how Tolkien's heroes both resemble and are distinctly different from those in classical epic. Achilles is absolutely without pity: when Hector begs him for mercy, he even goes so far as to wish that he could nerve himself to eat his enemy's flesh! Aeneas, by contrast, shows a more merciful side, displaying the Roman virtue of *clementia* (or mercy shown to an enemy): he is on the point of deciding to spare the wounded Turnus when he catches sight of the sword belt taken by the enemy leader as spoils from the body of his young protégé Pallas. Thrown into a rage by the reminder of Turnus' lack of compassion, Aeneas plunges his sword into his adversary's heart.

The themes of pity and mercy return in a rather different way in Tolkien: it is somewhat earlier in the action, when Frodo first encounters Gollum face to face on the borders of Mordor, that he opts to spare the pathetic creature. His pity for Gollum is explicitly connected with that of his uncle Bilbo, to which Gandalf alludes in his long narrative of earlier events in the second chapter, 'The Shadow of the Past'. At this stage, Frodo cannot understand how anyone could feel pity for such a disgusting creature, but is sternly rebuked by the wizard, who observes prophetically: 'my heart tells me that he [Gollum] has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many – yours not least'. This is indeed how events turn out: at the Cracks of Doom, Frodo is finally unable to throw the Ring into the fire, and it is only the fact that he had earlier spared Gollum that – ironically and providentially – results in its destruction. The strange 'duel' between these two enemies – invisible Frodo and crazed Gollum – has, unexpectedly, the outcome desired by all the 'good' characters. Virgil reworks the Homeric duel as a way to comment on heroic values and think through the problematic conflicts arising from the Roman ideal of *pietas* or duty: is Aeneas to display *clementia* towards his fallen rival, or take the vengeance he owes the

dead Pallas? Tolkien's reflections on the values of pity and mercy are coloured in turn by his Catholic Christian ideology: Frodo's pity for Gollum is ultimately justified and rewarded by the mysterious workings of Providence.

'Soup of story': classical echoes in times of change

I have pointed out some similarities between the characters and plot-structure of *The Lord of the Rings* and those of the Homeric and Virgilian poems. No doubt Tolkien himself would have explained the epic elements as constituents of the 'soup of story', the common stock of folktale motifs and typical plot-structures which constitute the joint inheritance of all writers. But perhaps we can go a little further, especially in interpreting the Virgilian echoes. At the most general level, we might argue that the epic elements in Tolkien's novel bring out the extent to which conceptions of heroism in the twentieth century continued to be conditioned by those established by ancient writers more than 2000 years ago; at the same time, as I have suggested, the characterisation of Tolkien's heroes also points to *differences* between his values and those of the ancient poets. More specifically, it is a striking fact that both the *Aeneid* and *The Lord of the Rings* were written in times of political upheaval, amid rapid and unsettling social change: the composition of the *Aeneid* coincided with the transition from Republic to Empire; Tolkien's mythos was first conceived during the First World War, and much of the writing of *The Lord of the Rings* carried out during the Second. These parallel historical contexts are perhaps especially relevant to the themes of rebirth and renewal noted above: both Tolkien and Virgil characteristically combine a nostalgia for the losses of the past with emphasis on the necessity for change, and the tentative hope that something new and worthwhile might arise from the ruins.

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